



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

COLLEGE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

The Vocation of Public Service:

A Normative Conceptualization of Work in Public Service

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Prepared for Graduate Research and Creative Activity Fair

March 2021



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Agenda

- Review of previous research
- Overview of methodology
- Discussion of preliminary findings
- Discussion of implications

Research Questions

How do city managers understand and experience vocation?

1. What stories do city managers tell about vocation?
2. How do city managers recognize a sense of vocation in colleagues and other public service practitioners?
3. How do city managers advance a discourse of vocation for the field of public administration broadly?
4. What are the implications of a discourse of vocation for public administration theory, practice, and education programs?

Calling and Vocation

- Opportunity to serve humanity, or “noblesse oblige” (Schorr, 1987; Hardy, 1990)
- Motivating for individuals who strive for self-excellence and self-fulfillment (Schorr, 1987)
- Joins self and service (Bellah et al., 2008; McSwite, 2002; Neafsey, 2006; Palmer, 1999; Buechner, 1973)



Public Service as a Vocation

- Working for government – the pursuit of significance (McSwite, 2002; Denhardt, 1993)
- The Public Administration as vocation in service of a 'cause' (Wamsley et al., 1990)
- Public administration parallels absurdity of human condition (McSwite, 2002)

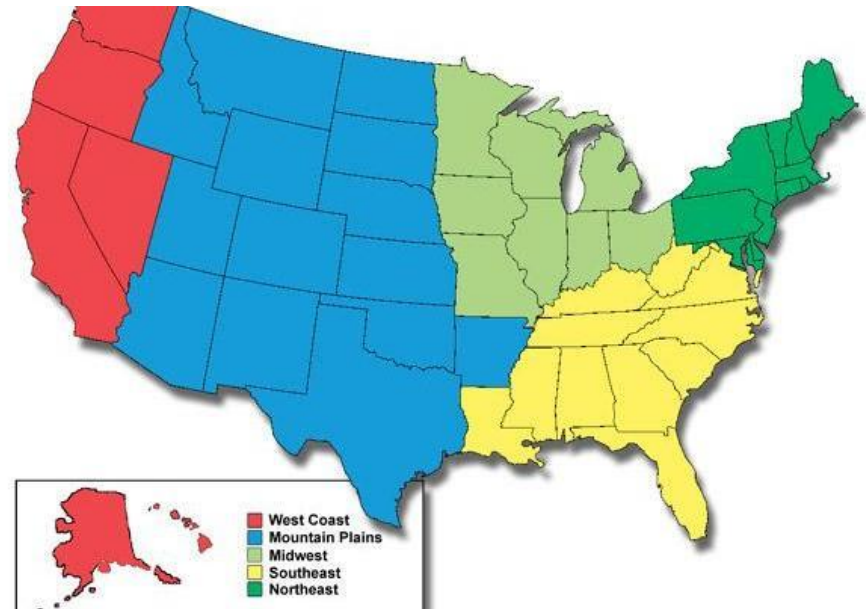


Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews with city managers
 - Highly professionalized subset of public administrators (Nelson & Svara, 2015; Reddick & Demir, 2014; Svara, 2010; Watson & Hassett; Casey & Vogel, 2019)
- Participants recruited based on ICMA criteria:
 1. Identified as council-manager governments in ICMA-Recognized Local Governments directory
 2. Cities with population of 20,000-50,000
 3. Consulted city websites/LinkedIn profiles to narrow sample

Data collection

- 40 interviews conducted
 - 8 interviews from each ICMA region
 - Conducted via phone or Zoom
 - Average interview length was 45 minutes
 - 38 interviewees consented to being recorded
 - Confidentiality ensured through interviewee information sheet



Source: ICMA Regions in the U.S. Retrieved on November 5, 2020, from <https://icma.org/icma-regions-us>

Data analysis

- Adopted narrative inquiry qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Chase, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)
- Interview transcriptions; summative and analytical memos following interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Maxwell, 2013)
- 2 rounds of coding using categorizing strategies with coding frames (Berg & Lune, 2012)

Preliminary findings and key themes

- Opportunity to serve humanity
- Emphasizes city managers' unique talents; joins self and service
- Extremely rewarding and fulfilling career
- Unprecedented challenges and common frustrations
- Perceived as more than “just a job”

Opportunity to serve humanity

“It is not about you. It is about **serving people, the community, and the organization**. And if you come to a point where you dread going to work when you get up, then it’s time to think about doing something different because it has got to be about service. You need to have **a heart for service...**”

“There's a lot to be said for... **feeling a sense that you're contributing to the society you're a part of ...I think some of us put a lot of time and effort into trying to make the communities we work for into better places.**”

“If you're somebody who **cares passionately about community and public service**, why are you not in this job?”

Emphasizes city managers' talents

“One of the things is basically an ability to sit there, **process information quickly**, learn something quickly and try to make a decision as fast as you can based on the information you have ...you've got to think fairly quick on your feet.”

“...you've got to understand how to sell things to the public and how the public perceives things...You have to really be able to translate what we do to the public. I mean sometimes I feel that **I'm as much a facilitator as I am a translator**, how government works and what we do.”

“**Active listening** is really important for anybody in our positions...That might seem like an obvious thing, but I'll tell you, there are plenty of city managers who don't want to listen. And I think that gets them in trouble with the council and it gets them in trouble with the community.”



Rewarding and fulfilling work

“...for me, there's nothing more **fulfilling** than being able to efficiently perform duties to **help a community**, to **help a citizen**, to help someone feel like their government is doing right by them and assisting them **in their time of need.**”

“Seeing the ability to **make that impact**, to **make a difference**, to make a decision that helps someone or that **makes a situation better**. The thing I like most about municipal government is you can see so quickly the direct impact of what you're doing. And if it's working, great. And if it's not, you have the ability to change it.”

“...it's very **worthwhile**. Despite all the drawbacks and all the challenges, working for a community, it's so much more fulfilling, for me anyway, than working for a company. I was never motivated to make money for a company. But **making a community better is really fulfilling.**”



Challenges and frustrations

“...the **best thing** about this job is **dealing with the public** and the **worst thing** about this job is **dealing with the public**. There's a lot of people out there who are misinformed, who just hate government, who don't understand how things work.”

“**Funding will always be a challenge at the local level** ...You have finite resources and your governing bodies says, ‘Well, I want this, I want this.’ And we continue to see more unfunded federal and state mandates passed down to the local level...”

“**Social media, Facebook, is a horrible thing**. I mean it really is. The ability for someone to hop on and say anything, things that people would not say to your face...they aren't willing to really, truly engage.”

“The **most frustrating part** for me is when I hear that **government workers are lazy, overpaid bureaucrats. It's so far from the truth**. I mean if I opened up my schedule on a weekly basis and showed the hours I work, the phone calls I take at night, the emails I respond to...”



More than “just a job”

“Certainly we have people working for the city who see it just as a job. But boy, once you get to a certain level in a municipal organization, you're really crazy to stay working there when you could go work someplace else for a lot more money and a lot less hassle...So **you don't do it for the money.** I think you do it because you **feel a commitment to the society you're in and to the community you're in...**”

“...it's very **honorable.** Because we are trying to do what is the very best for the community. **We're working within a system that is flawed** ...And there are those really great days where you're doing something really amazing, helping people.”

Implications

- Advances a discourse of vocation for the field
- Bridges public administration theory and practice, collaboratively creating a shared discourse
- Assists in recruiting and retaining talented, qualified individuals to enter public service
- Captures the “why” and “how” of the public service vocation
- Reminds us of the vitality of public service

Thank you!

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